THE Masquerader

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[CONTINUED.]

It was on this day, at the reassembling of parliament, that Fraide's great blow was to be struck. In the ten days since the affair of the caravans had been reported from Persia public feeling had run high, and it was upon the pivot of this incident that Loder's attack was to turn, for, as Lakeley was fond of remarking, "In the scales of public opinion one dead Englishman has more weight than the whole eastern question." It had been arranged that, following the customary procedure, Loder was to rise after questions at the morning sitting and ask leave to move the adjournment of the house on a definite matter of urgent public importance, upon which—leave having been granted by the rising of forty members in his support—the way was to lie open for his definite attack at the evening sitting. And it was with a mind attuned to this plan of action that he retired to the study immediately he had breakfasted and settled to a final revision of his speech before an early party conference should compel him to leave the house. But here again circumstances were destined to change his programme. Scarcely had he sorted his notes and drawn his chair to Chilcote's desk than Renwick entered the room with the same air of important haste that he had shown on a previous occasion.

"A letter from Mr. Fraide, sir. But there's no answer," he said, with unusual brevity.

Loder waited till he had left the room; then he tore the letter open. He read:

My Dear Chilcote—Lakeley is the recipient of special and very vital news from Meshed—unofficial, but none the less alarming. Acts of Russian aggression toward British traders are reported to be rapidly increasing, and it is stated that the authority of the consulate is treated with contempt. Pending a possible confirmation of this, I would suggest that you keep an open mind on the subject of tonight's speech. By adopting an anticipatory—even an unprepared—attitude you may find your hand materially strengthened. I shall put my opinions before you more explicitly when we meet. Yours faithfully,

HERBERT FRAIDE.

The letter, worded with Fraide's usual restraint, made a strong impression on its recipient. [illegible] thought that his speech might not only express opinions already tacitly held, but voice a situation of intense and national importance, struck him with full force. For many minutes after he had grasped the meaning of Fraide's message he sat neglectful of his notes, his elbows resting on the desk, his face between his hands, stirred by the suggestion that here might lie a greater opportunity than any he had anticipated.

Still moved by this new suggestion, he attended the party conclave that Fraide had convened and afterward lunched with and accompanied his leader to the house. They spoke very little as they drove to Westminster, for each was engrossed by his own thoughts. Only once did Fraide allude to the incident that was paramount in both their minds. Then, turning to Loder with a smile of encouragement, he laid his fingers for an instant on his arm.

"Chilcote," he had said, "when the time comes, remember you have all my confidence."

Looking back upon that day, Loder often wondered at the calmness with which he bore the uncertainty. To sit apparently unmoved and wait without emotion for news that might change the whole tenor of one's action would have tried the stoicism of the most experienced; to the novice it was well nigh unendurable. And it was under these conditions and fighting against these odds that he sat through the long afternoon in Chilcote's place, obeying the dictates of his chief. But if the day was fraught with difficulties for him it was fraught with dullness and disappointment for others, for the undercurrent of interest that had stirred at the Easter adjournment and risen with added force on this first day of the new session was gradually but surely threatened with extinction as hour after hour passed bringing no suggestion of the battle that had on every side been tacitly expected. Slowly and unmistakably speculation and dissatisfaction crept into the atmosphere of the house as moment succeeded moment and the opposition made no sign. Was Fraide shirking the attack or was he playing a waiting game? Again and again the question arose, filling the air with a passing flicker of interest, but each time it sprang up only to die down again as the ordinary business of the day dragged itself out.

Gradually, as the afternoon wore on, daylight began to fade. Loder, sitting rigidly in Chilcote's place, watched with suppressed inquiry the faces of the men who entered through the constantly swinging doors, but not one face, so eagerly scanned, carried the message for which he waited. Monotonously and mechanically the time passed. The government, adopting a neutral attitude, carefully skirted all dangerous subjects, while the opposition, acting under Fraide's suggestion, assisted rather than hindered the programme of postponement. For the moment the eagerly anticipated reassembling threatened dismal failure, and it was with a universal movement of weariness and relief that at last the house rose to dine.

But there are no possibilities so elastic as those of politics. At half past 7 the house rose in a spirit of boredom and disappointment, and at 8 o'clock the lobbies, the dining room, the entire space of the vast building, was stirred into activity by the arrival of a single telegraphic message.

The new development for which Fraide had waited came indeed, but it came with a force he had little anticipated. With a thrill of awe and consternation men heard and repeated the astounding news that, while personally exercising his authority on behalf of British traders, Sir William Brice-Field, consul general at Meshed, had been fired at by a Russian officer and instantly killed.

The interval immediately following the receipt of this news was too confused for detailed remembrance. Two ideas made themselves slowly felt—a deep horror that such an event could obtrude itself upon our high civilization and a strong personal dismay that so honored, distinguished and esteemed a representative as Sir William Brice-Field could have been allowed to meet death in so terrible a manner.

It was in the consciousness of this feeling, the consciousness that in his own person he might voice not only the feelings of his party, but those of the whole country, that Loder rose an hour later to make his long delayed attack.

He stood silent for a moment, as he had done on an earlier occasion, but this time his motive was different. Roused beyond any feeling of self consciousness, he waited as by right for the full attention of the house; then quietly, but with self possessed firmness, he moved the motion for adjournment.

Like a match to a train of powder the words set flame to the excitement that had smoldered for weeks, and in an atmosphere of stirring activity, a scene of such tense and vital concentration as the house has rarely witnessed, he found inspiration for his great achievement.

To give Loder's speech in mere words would be little short of futile. The gift of oratory is too illusive, too much a matter of eye and voice and individuality, to allow of cold reproduction. To those who heard him speak on that night of April 18 the speech will require no recalling, and to those who did not hear him there would be no substitute in bare reproduction.

In the moment of action it mattered nothing to him that his previous preparations were to a great extent rendered useless by this news that had come with such paralyzing effect. In the sweeping consciousness of his own ability he found added joy in the freedom it opened up. He ceased to consider that by fate he was a Conservative, bound by traditional conventionalities. In that great moment he knew himself sufficiently a man to exercise whatever individuality instinct prompted. He forgot the didactic methods by which he had proposed to show knowledge of his subject, both as a past and a future factor in European politics. With his own strong appreciation of present things he saw and grasped the vast present interest lying beneath his hand.

For fifty minutes he held the interest of the house, speaking insistently, fearlessly, commandingly on the immediate need of action. He unhesitatingly pointed out that the news which had just reached England was not so much an appalling fact as a sinister warning to those in whose keeping lay the safety of the country's interests. Lastly, with a fine touch of eloquence, he paid a tribute to the steadfast fidelity of such a man as Sir William Brice-Field, who, whatever political complications at home, pursue their duty unswerving on the outposts of the empire.

At his last words there was the silence that marks a pause—then all at once, with overpressive force, the storm of applause broke its bounds.

It was one of those stupendous bursts of feeling that no etiquette, no decorum, is powerful enough to quell. As he resumed his seat, very pale, but exalted as men are exalted only once or twice in a lifetime, it rose about him—clamorous, spontaneous, undeniable. Near at hand were the faces of his party, excited and triumphant; across the house were the faces of Sefborough and his ministry, uncomfortable and disturbed.

The tumult swelled, then fell away, and in the partial lull that followed Fraide leaned over the back of his seat. His quiet, dignified expression was unaltered, but his eyes were intensely bright.

"Chilcote," he whispered, "I don't congratulate you or myself. I congratulate the country on possessing a great man!"

The remaining features of the debate followed quickly one upon the other. The electric atmosphere of the house possessed a strong incentive power. Immediately Loder's ovation had subsided, the undersecretary for foreign affairs rose and in a careful and noncriminating reply defended the attitude of the government.

Next came Fraide, who, in one of his rare and polished speeches, touched with much feeling upon his personal grief at the news reported from Persia and made emphatic indorsement of Loder's words.

Following Fraide came one or two dissentient Liberals, and then Sefborough himself closed the debate. His speech was masterly and fluent; but, though any disquietude he may have felt was well disguised under a tone of reassuring ease, the attempt to rehabilitate his position—already weakened in more than one direction—was a task beyond his strength.

Amid extraordinary excitement the division followed, and with it a government defeat.

It was not until half an hour after the votes had been taken that Loder, freed at last from persistent congratulations, found opportunity to look for Eve. In accordance with a promise made that morning, he was to find her waiting outside the ladies' gallery at the close of the debate.

Disengaging himself from the group of men who had surrounded and followed him down the lobby, he discarded the lift and ran up the narrow stairs. Reaching the landing, he went forward hurriedly. Then with a certain abrupt movement he paused. In the doorway leading to the gallery Eve was waiting for him. The place was not brightly lighted, and she was standing in the shadow, but it needed only a glance to assure his recognition. He could almost have seen in the dark that night, so vivid were his perceptions. He took a step toward her, then again he stopped. In a second glance he realized that her eyes were bright with tears, and it was with the strangest sensation he had ever experienced that the knowledge flashed upon him. Here also he had struck the same note—the long coveted note of supremacy. It had rung out full and clear as he stood in Chilcote's place dominating the house; it had besieged him clamorously as he passed along the lobbies amid a sea of friendly hands and voices; now in the quiet of the deserted gallery it came home to him with deeper meaning from the eyes of Chilcote's wife.

Without a thought he put out his hands and caught hers.

"I couldn't get away," he said. "I'm afraid I'm very late."

With a smile that scattered her tears, Eve looked up. "Are you?" she said, laughing a little. "I don't know what the time is. I scarcely know whether it's night or day."

Still holding one of her hands, he drew her down the stairs, but as they reached the last step she released her fingers.

"In the carriage," she said, with another little laugh of nervous happiness.

At the foot of the stairs they were surrounded. Men whose faces Loder barely knew crowded about him. The intoxication of excitement was still in the air—the instinct that a new force had made itself felt, a new epoch been entered upon, stirred prophetically in every mind.

Passing through the enthusiastic concourse of men, they came unexpectedly upon Fraide and Lady Sarah surrounded by a group of friends. The old statesman came forward instantly and, taking Loder's arm, walked with him to Chilcote's waiting brougham. He said little as they slowly made their way to the carriage, but the pressure of his fingers was tense and an unwonted color showed in his face. When Eve and Loder had taken their seats, he stepped to the edge of the curb. They were alone for the moment, and, leaning close to the carriage, he put his hand through the open window. In silence he took Eve's fingers and held them in a long, affectionate pressure; then he released them and took Loder's hand.

"Good night, Chilcote," he said. "You have proved yourself worthy of her. Good night." He turned quickly and rejoined his waiting friends. In another second the horses had wheeled round, and Eve and Loder were carried swiftly forward into the darkness.

In the great moments of man's life woman comes before—and after. Some shadow of this truth was in Eve's mind as she lay back in her seat, with closed eyes and parted lips. It seemed that life came to her now for the first time—came in the glad, proud, satisfying tide of things accomplished. This was her hour, and the recognition of it brought the blood to her face in a sudden happy rush. There had been no need to precipitate its coming; it had been ordained from the first.

Whether she desired it or no, whether she strove to draw it nearer or strove to ward it off, its coming had been inevitable. She opened her eyes suddenly and looked out into the darkness, the darkness throbbing with multitudes of lives, all waiting, all desiring fulfillment. She was no longer lonely, no longer aloof. She was kin with all this pitiful, admirable, sinning, loving humanity. Again tears of pride and happiness filled her eyes. Then suddenly the thing she had waited for came to pass.

Loder leaned close to her. She was conscious of his nearer presence, of his strong, masterful personality. With a thrill that caught her breath she felt his arm about her shoulder and heard the sound of his voice.

"Eve," he said, "I love you. Do you understand? I love you," and, drawing her close to him, he bent and kissed her.

With Loder, to do was to do fully. When he gave, he gave generously; when he swept aside a barrier, he left no stone standing. He had been slow to recognize his capacities, slower still to recognize his feelings. But now that the knowledge came he received it

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